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ABSTRACT

When introducing doublespeak in the classroom, there is a great temptation to pose as the good guy exposing the lying words of all the powerful bad guys. To a degree teachers should do this. But they cannot stop there, for it implies a posture of moral superiority. A solution to this problem is to focus on questions of choice and to be aware of all expressions that close off debate. An example that closes off debate is the reference by Colonel Oliver North at the Iran-Contra hearings to the Freedom Fighters, rather than the less inflammatory choice, Contras. Using the term Freedom Fighters begs the question, for if they are really fighters for freedom, then the case is closed and there is no argument. But, there is not enough evidence to make a decision like that. Another troubling example, and much more subtle, is George Bush's accusation that Michael Dukakis was "soft on crime." This accusation was subtly converted in people's minds to the phrase "lover of Blacks" after he used as proof for his charge the case of Willie Horton, who was released from prison on furlough and committed rape and murder. The "Weekend Passes" television commercial produced by the National Security Political Action Committee helped make this identification explicit and perpetuated a kind of doublespeak. (MS)

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WITH A DOUBLE HEART DO THEY SPEAK

(A talk at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, St Louis, on 20 November 1988. By Walker Gibson.)

I invite your attention to Psalm 12 in the Old Testament.

> Help, Lord, for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men.
>
> 2 They speak vanity every one with his neighbor: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak.
>
> 3 The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things:
>
> 4 Who have said, With our tongues will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?
>
> 5 For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.
>
> 6 The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.
>
> 7 Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever.
>
> 8 The wicked walk on every side, the vilest men are exalted.

An alternative version of verse 2, by Robert Alter in the recent Literary Guide to the Bible, reads this way:

> Lies do they speak to each other / smooth talk /
> with a double heart do they speak.

That version even more clearly expresses a connection with our concerns about Doublespeak. We note the arrogance of those who, in verse 4, believe that their own words are supreme. Help is promised (verse 5) in direct discourse from God, and then (verse 6) the psalmist metaphorically defines Good Language:

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> The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.

Retentive readers of our Quarterly Review might recall that I alluded to this passage in last April's issue, arguing that the psalmist, in defining Doublespeak, has an advantage over those of us who live in a secular world. Most people simply cannot acknowledge the possibility of words pure "as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times." In fact, I take it as a central object of education precisely to disabuse students who may (and often do) cherish an illusion of perfect truth perfectly expressed. (Many students come to college thinking of Science in this way, though of course every scientist knows better.) But teachers of Doublespeak too run a risk of appearing to offer a perfect truth perfectly expressed.

When introducing Doublespeak in the classroom, there is a great temptation to pose as the Good Guy exposing the lying words of all the powerful Bad Guys. To a degree we must and should do this -- I've certainly performed in this way often enough in the past, and probably will again. (Besides, the students love it!) But I do not think we can stop there, for I'm uncomfortable with the posture of moral superiority this activity implies. Since we know that in all language there is a notorious gap between word and thing, we ought to try hard not to be simplistic without our own behavior in language. I have known

teachers of Doublespeak who were really doing nothing more than promoting their own political prejudices, and it's small comfort to recognize that their prejudices were often my prejudices.

This past August I had the privilege of attending the annual convention of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, held at St. John's, Newfoundland. The Canadians are energetically following in our footsteps with anti-Doublespeak activities, and for the past few years they have been handing out a Doublespeak Award in perfect harmony with ours. (The Bill Lutz of Canada is Rick Coe, of the University of British Columbia. He gets as much fun as Bill does out of announcing the award, which this year went to the Canadian Postal Service. A vast new and more efficient postal system was loudly advertised, to disguise the truth that services were in fact going to be curtailed, post offices abandoned, and so on.) But a number of Canadian teachers I talked to expressed serious misgivings, feeling that they were placing themselves in a position of defending some inflexible Right Language that had all the difficulties of the schoolmarm's much-maligned genteel Good English of some decades back. Perhaps these teachers were more anxious than need be, but I did find their hand-wringing troubling.

My own solution, such as it is, focuses on questions of <u>choice</u>, emphasizing the adjective <u>double</u> in our very name. I'll return to the example I used in that piece last April: the word Contra versus the words Freedom Fighter. It's a particularly

neat case, I think, and perhaps too easy for that reason. In any event, as you recall, Colonel North and his pals consistently used the term Freedom Fighters in referring to the opposition in Nicaragua, whereas the term Contras was available as a less inflammatory choice. He says Freedom Fighters, I say Contras. Why do I prefer one to the other? And how might I invite a class to respond to these alternatives? One answer is that the use of Freedom Fighters begs the question, for if they are really fighters for freedom, then the case is closed and there's no argument. But the case isn't closed: we simply don't have enough evidence either way to make a decision like that. The expression Freedom Fighters closes off debate, and that is its weakness. Beware of expressions that close off debate! That injunction rests on the assumption, surely shared by all teachers, that debate is a good thing.

We can easily conjecture that North's preference for Freedom Fighters rests not so much on evidence but on a wholly different image of the international situation. It rests on the conviction that East and West are locked in inevitable conflict, and that <u>anybody</u> who's for us and against them is to be encouraged and assisted. Many people now assume -- and I assume -- that this is an archaic view of international relations, the old Cold War that could at any instant become hot. Of course that may still be an accurate "scenario," but from the evidence I've been able to see lately, what the Russians seem to be especially

worried about right now is how to balance their budget. It does appear as if we'd be wise to follow their example.

I said just now that the Contra-Freedom Fighter choice may be too neat and easy. I'll conclude with an example from our recent election that isn't neat and easy at all, and is most troubling; it would be interesting to speculate how to get at this in a classroom. I'm thinking of the notorious Willie Horton. You'll recall that Bush called Dukakis "soft on crime," and the "proof" was the case of Horton, who was released from prison on furlough and promptly committed rape and murder. What Bush never said was that Horton was black, though every voter came to know that. The phrase "soft on crime" was subtly, ingeniously, and maliciously converted in people's minds to the phrase "lover of Blacks." (There's a vulgar synonym for that phrase.) You might call this a case of euphemism, I suppose -- he says Crime but he means Race -- but it's a case so insidious as almost to defy one's effort to untangle it.

The identification of Horton as black was made explicit by the "Weekend Passes" TV commercial that has aroused so much comment. A lengthy article in The New York Times for November 3 helps us begin the untangling. It appears that the commercial was produced by a so-called independent group, the National Security Political Action Committee, the biggest spender of all such groups. The founder of this committee is a person named Elizabeth Fediay. I quote the Times:

> On the day that Ms. Fediay announced the 28-day run for the commercial, she had a letter hand-delivered to James A. Baker 3d, chairman of the Bush campaign, offering to call it off. ... Mr. Baker responded three days before the commercials were to conclude their scheduled

> run with a letter that recounted Mr. Bush's earlier expressions of disapproval. "If they were really interested in stopping this, do you think they would have waited that long to send us a letter?" asked Floyd Brown, the group's political consultant.

Ms. Fediay herself was quoted by the Times reporters as saying: "Officially, the campaign has to disavow themselves from me. Unofficially, I hear that they're thrilled about what we're doing."

This whole affair seems to me a case not so much of Doublespeak, but Quadruplespeak. Let's recognize four separate voices. There is first the voice of Bush calling Dukakis soft on crime. There is the second implied voice linking "crime" to "Blacks." Third, we have the "Weekend Passes" commercial, and fourth, the bland and very tardy disavowal by our future Secretary of State. This event is surely one worthy of nomination for our 1989 Award, though as we all know there may appear examples even "better" in the months to come.

One trouble with this campaign, as with almost any campaign, was that each candidate acted as if he were the God of the psalm, uttering words "as silver purified seven times." Dukakis, in particular, has a curious habit of falling stress at the ends of his sentences, implying (to my ear) that of couse what he says is foregone conclusion, indisputable.

I hazard the guess that it was this falling stress at the ends of sentences that was partly responsible for people thinking of Dukakis as "arrogant." "With our tongues will we prevail -- who is lord over us?"

If we cannot these days accept the psalmist's absolute vision of a pure language from God, we can certainly share his anger and frustration over the language on earth.